Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

# EDGAR ALLAN POE, PATHOLOGICALLY

BY MERTON S. YEWDALE

No greater injustice can be done to the memory of Edgar Allan Poe than to acquit him wholly of the very vices that made his personality so fascinating and at the same time contributed so much to his genius. Even Poe himself, who during his lifetime sought to mystify not only by his personal life but by his writings, would have been the last man to applaud or even encourage well-meaning biographers either to disprove or palliate his weaknesses, particularly if by so doing it would strip him of the mystery which always enveloped his personality.

Poe understood too well the dramatic possibilities of abnormality, and it would have been wholly inconsistent with his eccentric temperament to have endorsed any attempt to absolve him of his abnormalities, if it meant that his personality would be deprived of the dramatic interest which those very abnormalities heightened. Moreover, it is highly probable that Poe, with his peculiar vanity,[1] secretly admired his own vices, and that he would rather have gone down to posterity as a great villain than as an insignificant saint.

Who knows but that the poet may have had some such idea in his mind when he selected the perfidious Griswold to write his memoirs—Griswold, Poe's Evil Angel, who thought himself a great poet, and whose poetry Poe excoriated, thus making an implacable enemy for himself?

But whether or not Poe selected Griswold with malice aforethought, it is certain that Griswold avenged himself on the dead poet, and in a most malignant and jealous spirit, blackened his character almost beyond belief.

[1] James A. Harrison, in his *Life and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, said that a "report current in the corps was that he [Poe] was a grandson of Benedict Arnold. Some good-natured friend told him of it, and Poe did not contradict it, but seemed rather pleased than otherwise at the mistake."

True it is that other biographers have erred by presenting Poe in perhaps too favorable a light, but somehow we are more inclined to forgive a charitable perversion of the truth than a vindictive one. We like to feel that the man whose works we revere had some good personal qualities, if for no other reason than that it assists our appreciation of his labors and strengthens our belief in his genius.

It would seem that this is a most unfair attitude to take toward the works of genius, particularly when there have been so many geniuses whose lives were anything but commendable, and yet it has been so from the beginning of recorded time. Human nature seems not to change in this respect, and there is example after example where appreciation of the man's labors was withheld simply because his mode of life was an offense to society.

Now granting that Poe had vices and that his critic wishes to discuss them, there seem to be two methods of procedure: the first is to consider the vices from a moral point of view—which would be but to hold the man up as a bad example and to consign him to perdition for his sins; the other is to consider his vices, not as bad habits grafted onto an otherwise good but weak character, but as being imbedded in his character so deeply as to be as much a part of his true self as is his genius. This second method we might call the pathological one, and it has this advantage over the other: it seeks not to judge Poe according to the Beatitudes, but aims only to analyze the causes of his aberrations. Besides it will in no wise detract from the already deep mystery surrounding his life and works; on the contrary, it will perhaps have the opposite effect—that of deepening the mystery as to how and why nature created a man with so many brilliant qualities, and then damned him with so many weaknesses.

We hear it commonly said that Edgar Allan Poe is the greatest of all American literary artists, and so he is; yet what is there distinctively American about him save that he was born in Boston? Stedman says: "From his father he inherited Italian, French, and Irish blood. * * * His mother, Elizabeth Arnold * * * was as purely English as her name." Harrison[1] says: "Rich currents of Irish, Scotch, English, and American blood ran together in

[1] Harrison says that Poe combined within himself "Celtic mysticism, Irish fervor, Scotch melody, the iris-tipped fantasy of the Shelleys and the Coleridges, and the independence and alertness of the transatlantic American into whom all the Old World characteristics had been born, on whom all these treasures of music and imagination, of passion and mystery had been bestowed by some fairy godmother."

his palpitating veins and produced a psychic blend unlike that of any other American poet." * * * In addition, Poe was much influenced by the wave of German mysticism which swept over America during his time.

It is almost hopeless to try to analyze a man with so great a mixture of different racial traits. He might have inherited his love of mysticism and whiskey from the Irish and Scotch; his sense of logic and ratiocination from the French; his literary quality and care in his accounts from the English and Americans; his love of splendor and grandeur from the Italians. His drug-taking he might have inherited from his Irish and English ancestry.

But even this does not explain why the man was as he was. There is obviously some other explanation—and one that accounts for his pathological condition.

Now it must not be taken for granted that because Poe was morbid and melancholy his writings were the immediate product of a brain diseased by alcohol and drugs; for it can easily be shown from his own confessions and the testimony of those who knew him well that a single drink of wine sent him into nervous hysteria, and that after a debauch he was incapacitated for days. He might conceivably have worked under the influence while he wrote at home, but he certainly was not an habitual drunkard, and especially when he filled his various positions of editor.

Of course, there were times when as editor he imbibed; several times he was found drunk at his post, and once or twice he was dismissed. But to say that all his work was done while he was drunk or drugged is an idle and malicious statement that cannot be proved.

Poe drank and drugged, but only periodically. After his wife's death he indulged more than ever; but that he swallowed whiskey and laudanum to get inspirations for his weird tales and poems (as is so often charged) is wholly incompatible with the temperament of the man.

But the question is not so much whether Poe drank and drugged much or little, but why he did; and the answer seems to be found in the peculiar make-up of his character.

At first view it would appear that Edgar Allan Poe had been born without human feeling, but this seems hardly possible when we consider his love and solicitude for his child-wife, Virginia, and her mother, Mrs. Clemm. Nevertheless, his feeling was not a free agent, as it is in the normal

man. In fact, there is every indication that his feeling was almost wholly under the strong, magnetic power of his intellect—that is, his intellect fed, like a parasite, on his feelings. It is just as though there was between his heart and brain a system of wires over which currents of emotion passed from his heart into his brain, there to combine with his thoughts, the contact producing the sparks which in turn made his genius.

Conceive then a heart continually pouring feelings of melancholy and mysticism into a brain illuminated by the light of cold reason and logic, and you have a combination well-nigh fatal to any man's personal well-being.

Now what greatly complicated matters was that Poe's mind was excessively ratiocinative: recollect *The Gold Bug,* and *Maelzel's Chess-Player.* No less did speculative mystery interest him: recollect *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom.* Even in the prose-poem, *Eureka,* that combination of intuition and scientific investigation, he attempted to solve the mystery of life and the universe.

Reason was the dominant force of his life. It drove him like a slave-driver with a black lash in his hand. Yet Poe was continually experimenting with the processes of reasoning. There is a report that one day Poe had a visitor, and that while the visitor was talking, Poe kept on writing. The visitor, becoming irritated at Poe's inattention, mentioned the matter, whereupon Poe replied that he meant no discourtesy, and that he was merely experimenting to see if he could listen to a conversation and write coherently at the same time. And thus through his entire life he was investigating, analyzing and comparing, being driven always by that irresistible force—Reason.

Now if Poe was mad, as so many people claim, it was not from mysticism or even melancholy, but reason, and Chesterton makes that very nice distinction in his chapter on *The Maniac.*[1]

And farther on he says:

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. * * *

[1] "Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad, but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. * * * Moreover, it is worthy of remark that when a poet really was morbid it was commonly because he had some weak spot of rationality on his brain. Poe, for instance, really was morbid; not because he was poetical, but because he was specially analytical."

The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious.

In some sense this reasoning of Chesterton's applies directly to Poe, but with this exception: Poe was at once a mystic, a creative artist, and a logician; likewise, he was a mathematician. One of his contemporaries wrote: "He [Poe] had a wonderful aptitude for mathematics"; while Harrison said: "Now his mind developed a strange and lucid power of analytical reasoning, like a sixth sense suddenly superadded to a brain already abnormally developed."

We know that even from his boyhood Poe was so morbid that he used to go at night to the graveyard and sit near the grave of one of his beloved friends, and as Harrison says, he later

revelled in the senses and in sense-products—rhythm, landscape, psychological phenomena of a dim and terrible yet sensualistic character, borderlands betwixt life and death, flashes of the subliminal consciousness whence well up mysterious telepathic communications between the seen and the unseen, fateful and funereal scenes of ruin, desolation, and decay draped in the utmost pomp and magic of style.

All of which shows that Poe was both logical and morbid, and that between the two, particularly when he was sober, he was pursued continually by reason and phantasmagoria.

But the reviewer of Gill's *Life of Poe* says that his intoxication "took the form of terrible despondency," which seems inconsistent; for why should the man drink to induce in a greater degree the very thing that he was trying to rid himself of when he was in his sober senses?

Is it not more probable that Poe drank because he discovered that whiskey dispelled for the time being the specters of his sober imagination, and broke the hold that reason had on his intellect?

And may not whiskey have released what little human feeling he had from the clutch of his parasitic intellect and given him a rest from the incessant warfare which went on within him?

In a letter to Mrs. Whitman, Poe wrote:

I have absolutely *no* pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge. It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have perilled life and reputation and reason. It has been in the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories.

This letter was written probably after the death of his wife.

Whatever the change that whiskey wrought in him, it is certain that it supplied him with something that was left out of him at birth, and *that* something was social instinct. He was by nature a solitary man and apparently he visited very little, showing his want of animal spirits and aversion to society.

But whiskey altered him; for in his letter to a now unknown friend he wrote:

> The desire for society comes upon me only when I have become excited by drink. Then *only* I go—that is, at these times only I *have been* in the practice of going among my friends; who seldom, or in fact never, having seen me unless excited, take it for granted that I am always so.

It is evident then that Poe's drinking was to get "surcease from sorrow," to feel the human relation with his fellow-men, and to dispel rather than intensify his melancholy. And it is equally evident that he hardly ever went among his friends; from which it follows that a great part of his life was lived in private of which we know very little.

In a letter which Mr. George R. Graham wrote to Mr. W. F. Gill, he said: "The mysteries of his (Poe's) inner life were never revealed to any one, but his intimates well understood that to mystify his hearer was a strong element of his mind." "The mysteries of his inner life"—his love affairs? No, they were quite well known. What then? May it not have been his laudanum-taking?

As whiskey excited him, diffused his faculties, and made him sociable, so laudanum quieted him, concentrated his faculties, and increased his solitariness, and it brought about a state of mind which he describes in *Berenice*.

> To muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book, to become absorbed, for the better part of a summer's day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the floor; to lose myself, for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in: such were a few of the most common and least pernicious vagaries induced by a condition of the mental faculties, not indeed, altogether unparal-

leled, but certainly bidding defiance to anything like analysis or explanation.

Any one acquainted with the effect of laudanum, and especially in heavy doses, knows that the pupils of the laudanum-taker's eyes close almost to pin-points, and that the mind centers itself with great concentration upon the first object to hand. As Poe said, it may be "some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book."

But on the other hand, De Quincey said that laudanum "gives an expansion to the heart and the benevolent affections," and is a "healthy restoration to that state which the mind would naturally recover upon the removal of any deep-seated irritation from pain that had disturbed and quarreled with the impulses of a heart originally just and good," and which induces in the laudanum-taker a feeling that the "diviner part of his nature is paramount — that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity, and high over all is the great light of the majestic intellect."

The difference in the two men's descriptions of the effect of laudanum is merely the difference in the size of the dose. Poe's description would indicate that the dose had been large— De Quincey's, that it had been small.

Now if as De Quincey says, laudanum makes the user feel that the "diviner part of his nature is paramount — that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity," then it is very probable that laudanum was the means of inducing in Poe thoughts and feelings of love. As to the kind of love — that has always been a question. Some say that Poe was a libertine; some say he was self-interested in getting some woman to help him financially; some say he was the perfect type of poet-lover and woman-worshiper. We, however, think that he was none of these; that he was merely a dreamer about love and exalted more by love itself than fascinated by the objects of his love.

On this point Stedman says, that Poe "was not a libertine. Woman was to him the impersonation of celestial beauty, her influence soothed and elevated him, and in her presence he was gentle, winning and subdued."

And Wilmer says:

Of all men that I ever knew, he [Poe] was the most passionless. Poets of ardent temperament, such as Anacreon, Ovid, Byron, and Tom Moore, will always display their constitutional peculiarity in their literary compositions; but Edgar Allan Poe never wrote a line that

gave expression to a libidinous thought. The female creations of his fancy are all either statues or angels. His conversation, at all times, was as chaste as that of a vestal, and his conduct, while I knew him, was correspondingly blameless.

In *Berenice* Poe wrote (probably a self-analysis): "In the strange anomaly of my existence, feelings with me, *had never been* of the heart, and my passions were always of the mind."

Then we have the testimony of Mrs. Osgood, who wrote on her death bed, seven months after Poe's death:

I think no one could know him—no one *has* known him personally—certainly no woman—without feeling the same interest [as I did]. I can sincerely say that I have frequently *heard* of his aberrations on his part from the "straight and narrow path." I have never *seen* him otherwise than gentle, generous, well bred, and fastidiously refined. To a sensitively and delicately nurtured woman, there was a peculiar and irresistible charm in the chivalric, graceful, and almost tender reverence with which he invariably approached all women who won his respect. It was this which first commanded and always retained my regard for him.

And then we have Poe's own estimate of women. In his *Poetic Principle,* he said:

No nobler *theme* ever engaged the pen of poet. It is the soul-elevating idea, that no man can consider himself entitled to complain of Fate while, in his adversity, he still retains the unwavering love of woman. * * * He feels it [true Poesy] in the beauty of woman, in the grace of her step, in the luster of her eye, in the melody of her voice, in her soft laughter, in her sigh, in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments, in her burning enthusiasms, in her gentle charities, in her meek and devotional endurances; but above all—ah! far above all—he kneels to it, he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty of her love.

Yet it was generally believed that though his affections for women were unusually ardent, they were fleeting and capricious; and there seems to be some truth in the statement, for in a letter to Mrs. Shew (June, 1848), he wrote: "Are you to vanish like all I love, or desire, from my darkened and 'lost soul'? . . . There was love, hope, and *sorrow* in your smile, instead of love, hope, and *courage* as before. . . . Unless some true and tender and pure womanly love saves me, I shall hardly last a year longer alive."

In an undated letter to Mrs. Whitman, but written probably in 1848 also, he wrote: "But ah, darling, if I *seem* selfish, yet believe that I truly, *truly* love you, and that it

is the most spiritual love that I speak, even if I speak it from the depths of the most passionate of hearts."

And in November, 1848, he wrote to Mrs. Richmond: "But, Annie, I know that you felt too deeply the nature of my love for you to doubt *that* even for one moment, and this thought had comforted me in my bitter sorrow."

Now any man who, in the short space of a year, could write such love letters to three women certainly was not truly in love with any one of them. The best that can be said of Poe is that he was fascinated by the mystery of love or that opium had made him sentimental. An anonymous author, writing on the subject of opium, says:

> The opium-eater is without sexual appetite; anger, envy, malice, and the entire hell-brood claiming kin to these, seem dead within him, or at least asleep; while gentleness, kindness, benevolence, together with a sort of sentimental religionism, constitute his habitual frame of mind. If a man has a poetical gift, opium almost irresistibly stirs it into utterance.

Now if Poe had been a sensualist, there might have been some reason for his indiscriminate love-making, but that he was physically cold and passionless; that he took laudanum; that he wrote a special letter to Mrs. Whitman in which he said: "But there was yet another idea which impelled me to send you those lines — 'I said to myself the sentiment — the holy passion which glows in my bosom *for her,* is of Heaven, heavenly, and has not taint of earth;'" that the characters of his women friends were beyond reproach, are sufficient evidence that his outpourings of love were nothing more than drug-induced ecstasies of love, as visionary and idealistic as his love poems.

Still there may be another reason why he so ardently declared his love; his women friends, particularly Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Osgood, were women of unusually strong characters, and mixed with their high regard for the man was undoubtedly the maternal instinct. To them Poe probably seemed like a child, and his constant pleading to them, rather than a masterful domination over them, must have elicited their pity and solicitude, rather than their deep, passionate love.

We get a hint of his suppliant attitude from *Ligeia,* and while he is apparently speaking of his child-wife, he must have had some one else in mind, since he always taught and

completely dominated Virginia. Perhaps he was thinking of Mrs. Whitman when he wrote:

> I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during earlier years of our marriage. * * * Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted.

But the manifestations of his moods are so many and so varied that it is almost impossible to make accurate deductions. However, it is doubtless true that laudanum lulled his restless spirit, thereby permitting his moral feelings to rise to a plane of love — pure and ethereal, and that the world of specters and phantoms being temporarily banished, the poet was ushered into another world (perhaps that of youth), bright, full of light, hope and promise.

Likewise, it is certain that his fine friendships with those noble women encouraged him to fight the demons that were continually dragging him down into the maelstrom, and though he lost the gallant fight, it must be forever credited to his loyal women friends that they saved him long enough for him to do the work that has stamped him as the greatest literary intellect of America.

Is Poe to be condemned? He was born with an abnormal intellect which was continually seething with thoughts of death, tombs, graveyards, together with "funereal scenes of ruin, desolation, and decay draped in the utmost pomp and magic of style." And only in alcohol and drugs did he seem to find relief from these diabolic apparitions.

He was born without human emotions, or with them so submerged in his intellect that he could almost be said to have been a man without a heart. Laudanum seemed to supply, or at least unleash his emotions. Who can say surely that whiskey and laudanum were not as necessary to his life as apparently the specters and phantoms were to his genius?

Almost every biographer has speculated as to the heights that Poe's genius would have reached had he abstained from alcohol and drugs, and perhaps lengthened his life. But one might easily reply that with an intellect which saw the world with such clearness and intensity, amounting almost to a demoniac concentration, and with a nature that was chronically morbid, it is difficult to prove

that alcohol and drugs did not keep him from plunging early in life over into raving insanity. Even when speaking of the death of his wife, Poe said: "I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness, I drank — God only knows how often or how much."

Poe died very much as he had lived — still wondering at the mysteries of life and death. It makes little difference now that he was a drunkard, a drug-user, a recluse, a misanthrope; he was a great literary artist, who paid the highest price for his genius of any man who ever lived. And it behooves us to put aside all moral considerations and to remember only that it was largely through his efforts that the name of America was prominently engraved upon the literary scroll of the world.

MERTON S. YEWDALB.